

The buried hunting 'hutte' merges into the landscape. The firing ports overlook the water.



VIVE LA DIFFÉRENCE?

Ian Mason finds surprises galore when he crosses the Channel to try duck hunting - the French way...

An early January 'phone call from my old chum Howard Day was intriguing; would I like to try duck hunting the 'traditional French way'? Unfortunately Howard couldn't furnish any further details because he was as much in the dark as me, but, ever keen to try a new shooting experience, I signed up on the spot.

Now a time worn cliché holds that the French usually do things differently - but my goodness this certainly rings true for French wildfowling - as I was shortly to find out.

Our destination was one of France's most celebrated duck hunting areas, the Bay of Somme in Picardy. We travelled by overnight car-ferry from Portsmouth to Le Havre. Once our shotguns had been retrieved from the shipping office, it was a short two-hour drive to Saint-Valery-Sur-Somme for a lunch-time rendezvous with our hosts, the lovely Sandy Leleu and her charming partner Benoit Nagle.

Food in the quayside restaurant was fabulous, but my eyes were constantly drawn to the window and out across the harbour to distant reed beds teeming with duck. Not for nothing is this region known as France's waterfowl Mecca.

Inland from the bay, the flat marshy landscape is pockmarked with hundreds of flight ponds. Look closely and you notice a small mound at the side of each pond. These are the 'huttes'. In their simplest form a rustic roofed duck blind buried in the ground. Nearer the estuary, many huttes float within a small enclosure, rising and falling with the tide (hutte flottante).

Home from home

Others are splendid constructions with stoves, electricity, bunks and many other luxuries that make them comfortable hunting lodges. Limitations on the number of huttes make these quite valuable. A flight pond with hutte and a couple of acres of bog can sell for in excess of 100,000 Euros.

The hunters who use these lodges are known as hutteurs and they are totally committed to their sport. Many travel hundreds of kilometres to spend a night in their hutte and most huttes are occupied every night during the duck hunting season, which runs from late August (the opening date varies, but is usually around the 22nd) to January 31st.

We finished lunch and drove around the bay to